

## 5x + 1 by lollercakes

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**Summary:**

the five times Hopper was scared and one time he wasn't

*Thunder Rolls*

He'd never heard something so loud, the house rattling around him as he jerked awake in bed. It was his first night staying home without his parents, they'd gone off to some rich man's party in the neighbouring town and he'd assured them he would be fine with his dog Tuck and the next door neighbour's phone number.

But he hadn't been expecting the weather, of all things, that the radio said was the storm to end all storms.

Pulling the blanket up over his head, he pressed his face into Tuck's fur and tried to breathe through the nerves that wracked his body. It helped. Barely.

The rumbling continued for another hour before the wind picked up, trees and shadows lashing at the clapboard walls that protected him. He wanted his mom.

Why had he tried to be so damn brave earlier? It was stupid of his parents to believe him. They never should have left. What kind of parents left an eight year old to fend for themselves?

Beside him Tuck cried as a crash from the main level of the house found its way up to his room.

"Don't you start," he scolded the dog while simultaneously crowding in closer. Storms had always been his weakness, ever since he was small, and this one was wearing him out. He probably shouldn't have listened to the man on the radio when he started talking about tornadoes. He hoped it wouldn't be a tornado. He didn't even know what to do in a tornado.

The howl of the wind ran up his spine and when the first lightning strike hit, his room flashing with bright white light, he jumped from his bed and grabbed for his blanket and pillow. He refused to put up with this. He wasn't a scaredy cat. He wasn't going to lay up here and wait for the roof to crash in on him.

Grabbing his things, he trudged down into the half-finished basement and pulled out his dad's old army cot before curling up with Tuck once again. The basement walls were thick enough that eventually, after a few hours of anxious shivering, he finally slipped back to sleep.

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### *The Sky is Falling*

"You're being ridiculous, Hopper," Joyce called from above him. He looked up and then away, the sightline leading directly up her skirt and to her stocking-clad legs.

"No, I'm not. I'm being practical," he responded gruffly, his mouth dry as he tried to get the picture of her legs out of his mind.

He was just starting to notice Joyce as something other than his best friend, her body filling out in all the ways that seemed to drive him to insanity every night and made him take cold showers before school every morning. It wasn't her fault - she was just existing - but her body was changing and all he wanted was for her to notice that he was changing too.

That's why he was out here, at least, watching as his friend climbed into a tree in her best school uniform to retrieve something as useless as a stranded kite. He would have done it himself - he was desperate to show off lately - but the cast on his wrist made doing anything useful impossible lately.

"You don't need to avoid every school dance to maintain your 'too-cool-for-school' status. That's ridiculous," she huffs as she reaches, her arm outstretched towards the fluttering bolt of colour..

"But it's practical not to waste money on tickets when Chrissy Carpenter would never say yes if I asked - "

The scream shatters through him and when he looks over it's just in time to see Joyce fall, her body collapsing on the ground in a limp mess. Heart in his throat, he rushes to her side and drops to his knees, all the while shouting her name and pleading with her to wake up.

When she doesn't move, doesn't speak or open her eyes, he feels the blood drain from his face as he presses her bangs back from her forehead. "Joyce," he cries, shouting for help between whispering soothing words to her.

It's Old Man Carter who trots towards them from his front door, his ancient frame stumbling until he's kneeling with Hopper, panting. "I called the ambulance, they'll be here soon. Don't move her!" Carter jerks Hoppers arm back as he reaches to move her onto her back. "I learned it in the war - you don't move someone if they land unconscious. Could be a spine thing."

"She just fell," Hopper croaks desperately, his hands clenched as he forces himself not to shake her back to consciousness. All he wants is to pull her to him, to hold her until she wakes up again, but something rings true in Carter's words and he would hate to be the one who broke her. It was already his fault she was up there. His fault that his black hole had got her.

"I saw. It's okay Jim - the doctors will know what to do," he adds and squeezes Hopper's shoulder tightly as the sirens fill the air.

Later, he starts to feel the adrenaline subside as he sits by her hospital bed, prone and silent with his hand wrapped around hers. The fear crowds in then, caustic and hot as it fills every inch of him. Who would he talk to if Joyce never woke up? Who would give him the benefit of the doubt and hear out his crazy theories? Who would pat his hand when he got a shitty grade or let him sleep on their floor after his dad kicked him out?

He needed Joyce. She was his rock and the thing that held him together. He couldn't do this life without her.

"Mmm-my head," she groans and Hopper's head snaps up towards hers in time to see her eyes fluttering and her brow crease.

"Joyce, oh thank God Joyce," he grunts and jolts until he's pressing his lips to her forehead, his clunky cast awkward as his fingers run through her hair.

"Ow, Hop... " She moans and the sound of it makes him back away

like he's been burned, giving her space even though all he wants is to crowd into her. "What happened? Why does everything hurt?" Her voice is small, pained and quiet, as she finally squints her eyes open.

"You fell out of a tree and knocked yourself out. We're matching now, with our casts," he adds lamely, sitting back in his chair and scooting it until he's eye-level with her. The smallest smile ghosts over her features before she closes her eyes again, drifting. "Joyce... I was so scared," he pauses and slips his good hand back through the hospital bed bars to brush against her cheek. "I don't know what I would do without - "

"James Hopper, I think it's time you leave," Joyce's mother, cold and usually intoxicated, scolds from the doorway. Hopper's head snaps up and measures the moment before slipping his hand back to his side and making the small smile on Joyce's face disappear. Joyce's mother hadn't been here for the last few hours, off drinking or sleeping or doing anything but being here to support her daughter, and Hopper had to shut that anger away, lock it up before it made him do something he'd regret.

"She's awake, ma'am. I just wanted to make sure she woke up," he fumbles around for his stuff, not willing to get into an argument with this woman as her daughter lay in the hospital bed between them. It wasn't the time. It wasn't his place.

"I told you earlier you were to stay away from her. She never would have been up there if it weren't for you!" She shouts and Hopper nods, stepping towards the door and into the hallway before the woman can really unleash on him.

He realizes then that he hadn't said goodbye. Hadn't told Joyce everything he'd wanted to say. Turning to the nurses station and catching the sympathetic eye of Joyce's nurse, he steps over to her.

"Can I leave her a note?"

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*Good Morning Vietnam*

Another goddamn body.

Stepping through the reeds, he closes his eyes as he passes the rotting flesh, holding his breath from the smell that would otherwise overwhelm him. He was starting to get desensitized to it, starting to see it as normal, and that recognition made his stomach turn.

“Hopper - Comms says we need to pick up the pace. Reported contact right behind us,” Thompkins shouts from up ahead. The man had been a thorn in his side since basic, but they’d become brothers in arms in the hell that was the jungle they’d been forced into.

“Got it, man,” he grunts in return and moves through down the marked pathway at a quicker pace.

He’d been in Vietnam for six months now. Six months of fighting, of trench foot and garbage food. Six months since he’d last heard from his friends back home. From Joyce. And there was nothing to gain from it, no shining metals, no purpose of fighting for the greater good. Just death and misery, sweat and rot.

He wanted to go home. He’d never say it out loud. Would never admit his weakness. But inside he knew that he wasn’t who he used to be and the new him, the new Hopper, was a shadow of a person. Was an embarrassment who screamed in his sleep, who woke up with tears in his eyes on more than one occasion, and who saw every body, every dead soul, and took it inside of him.

“Up ahead on the left,” Thompkins shouts from further up the path forcing Hopper to freeze.

“Toe poppers?” He verifies as his eyes scan the pathway around him. His heart was in his throat as he searched for any sign of the landmine field that they’d just wandered into.

“Looks like. I’ll mark the way, keep your eyes clear.”

The unit moved onward, slower than they should be with the enemy at their back. He tried not to think about it as he checked every step and weighed every breath.

It was the first shot that snapped into a tree near him, splintering the wood into the air like a firework, that made him drop to the ground

instinctively. Gun against his chest and mud on his face, he struggled to catch his breath as he measured the different choices he had.

He could crawl - it was slow and risky, but would keep him below the fire at least until the enemy caught him and turned him into a POW. Or he could get up and run, risk a bullet in his back and a mine under his foot, maybe getting out safely.

“Fuck,” he shouted as the firing picked up and screams started to ring out around him. He didn’t want to die like this, in some hole in the mud from a bullet that was meant for anyone. Shifting onto his knees, he burst from the ground and returned fire into the trees behind him, taking off at a haphazard pace and only barely getting an eye on the ground below him for potential mines.

He doesn’t know how long he runs, how far his adrenaline fuels him, but sometime later he’s breaking through a line of trees and into a friendly camp, fellow soldiers staring at him like he’s the walking dead. The cold sweat that had broken out at the first shot has warmed, his body acclimatizing to a new normal that he wished he’d never experienced.

“Are you coming from the west?” One man asks, dirt stained and worn.

“Yes. Did anyone else make it? We were ambushed in a minefield,” Hopper replies as his breathing becomes more manageable. He’s still clutching his rifle. Still watching everything around him like it’s about to fall apart.

The soldier shakes his head. “No, we heard the explosions though...”

Hopper knows then that the black hole got them, his unit, Thompkins. That’s how it worked now. That was what his Vietnam was going to be like.

He didn’t want to be here. He just wanted to go home.

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### *The Reckoning*

“Jim, the doctor has set an appointment for us this afternoon at four.

Can you get out early and meet me?" Diane's voice is tense on the other end of the line, her calmness belying the stress that he knows she's feeling. That they're both feeling.

Sara had been sick for weeks now and the doctors had been running test after test since she had her first episode in the yard. Hopper wasn't sure if it was the waiting that was making things strained or the constant lack of solutions that the medical team had to offer. Either way he was snapping at everything - Diane, his partner, the clerk at the corner store - and he needed something to focus on before it all became too much.

He needed Sara to be okay again.

"Yeah. I'll meet you there?"

"Yes please. Love you," she sighs when she says it, as though it's a chore, and he doesn't say it back.

The day crawls forward, the stress creeping up on him like a shadow until he can't sit or eat or drink or even breathe. He knows that whatever these doctors have to say it won't be good news - they don't bring you in for appointments for good news - and he was never the person who would get the good news.

He was cursed.

Or at least that's how he felt, trudging into the lobby of the doctor's office. He stands there, hands clenched and in pockets, staring at the staircase before him and trying to force himself up the steps. But he can't.

His chest is too tight and his breaths are too short. The sweat on his brow isn't from the brisk walk from the car or from the burst of heat from the lobby vents. It's the fear that's burning in him - the truth that's hiding at the top of those stairs threatening to destroy everything that he holds dear.

"Jim," Diane says from her place at the top of the stairs, her voice pulling him back to his body and jerking him back to the here and now. He looks at her then and her returning frown, the shake of her



head, makes him gulp back his words as he forces himself forward and into the black hole that steals everything from him.

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### *It Lives*

The... Upside Down, as the kids called it, reminded him too much of Vietnam with it's dreary haunting sounds and the vines that crawled across everything, strangling the life from the objects that existed here.

He had to shove away the memories that pulled at him so that he could keep his eyes focused forward and his ears trained on Joyce's breaths, desperate to keep her anxiety calm enough that they would both make it out of here alive. He owed her that much.

"I think it's up here on the right," she huffs, her voice higher than usual as the stress radiates from her.

"Got it," he steps around the corner and leads the way onward, gun steady in his hands despite the nerves that he's trying to hide.

The part he doesn't mention about being down here, the thing that's pulling at him, are the memories of his last days with Sara that seem to be drawn to this world. They press at him like hot pokers, clouding his vision until he has to pause and look to see Joyce in her hazmat suit, remember what he's doing here.

He doesn't want to think about that. Doesn't want to remember everything that has been stolen from him in his lifetime. All he wants is to save Will, to bring him back to Joyce and give her the second chance he never got.

"I see him! Will! Will, honey!" Joyce starts to scream and jog ahead, awareness lost for their surroundings until he pushes past her and takes in the sight of her boy, held to the wall with a vine down his throat, just like Sara had been.

The fear echoes through him then and he pulls at the tube, desperate and determined. When it comes loose the boy isn't breathing, isn't moving, and Hopper pictures Sara in her hospital bed, Diane in his

arms as the doctors try to restart her heart. The memories choke and burn him, stealing his resolve and making him pause before his training kicks in, police and army sergeants shouting at him to start CPR. To breathe for him.

“Will, oh god,” Joyce cowers next to him before Hopper gives her instructions, makes her useful as he starts compressions.

Time stops then and with the adrenaline running through him and the fear coating everything like a thick tar, he struggles to breathe as he fights to bring Will back to life. When the boy coughs, when his lungs inflate and his body shudders, Hopper nearly collapses with the relief that rushes through him.

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### *Dawn's Early Light*

He didn't want to open his eyes and break the spell that had fallen over them, that had brought them to his bed sometime last night and given them what they'd been seeking since they were teenagers, given them each other.

He didn't want to lose it. To lose her.

So he kept his eyes closed. Listened to her breathing and felt the curl of her fingers as they held onto his.

Later, when the sun peeks through the blinds and the sound of the birds outside his window begins to calm, he feels her body shift, the mattress move as she starts to come awake. He keeps his eyes closed, trying to will the moment to not shatter around him like so many other perfect things he once had.

And then he feels it. Her fingers on his brow. Her leg sliding between his until she's pressed against him, a contented sigh escaping from her as she relaxes into him. The smile that crosses his lips can't be stopped and it gives him away.

“Hop,” she murmurs, her lips sliding against his. The uncertainty of how this morning would go - of whether she would slip out in the night or turn her back on him in the light of day - starts to ease from

him and he opens his eyes.

She's looking at him then, wide and brown doe eyes that say volumes without uttering a word. Those eyes could break him but they don't. They heal his scars, cover over all the sadness that aches through him and makes him feel light again, like there was hope.

"Joyce, I - " he pauses as she kisses him again, her hand running through the hair on his chest until it closes over his heart.

"I didn't realize that I was waiting years for this," she whispers when she pulls back a moment later, his body alight with her.